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ABSTRACT

At almost the same moment teachers became aware of the special power that writing has for the creation of thought, they also became aware that the world has moved from literacy into "secondary orality." For many, this new world is threatening, an apparent challenge to the analytical thought that is fundamental for academic literacy. In particular, the fear is that with television, as Neil Postman argues, students may be amusing themselves to death. To future generations, however, these fears may seem as ill-founded as those Plato expressed on the dangers of writing. The task for teachers, then, is twofold: first, to guide students through the history of the communication revolution, so that they can be empowered by the knowledge of how different media affect thought in different ways, and second, to help students use one medium to challenge and engage another. Students engaged in a learning environment that combines the holistic and integrative world of television and the analytical and structured world of the computer are students who should be uniquely capable of using one medium, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, "to clobber other media." (Fifteen references are attached.) (Author/RAE)

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Writing-Thinking:
The Historical Perspective for an Electronic World

Abstract

At almost the same moment teachers became aware of the special power that writing has for the creation of thought, we also became aware that we had moved from a literate world into a world of "secondary orality." For many, this new world is threatening, an apparent challenge to the analytical thought that is fundamental for academic literacy. In particular, we fear that with television, as Neil Postman argues, our students may be amusing themselves to death. To future generations, however, our fears may seem as ill-founded as those Plato expressed on the dangers of writing. Our task as teachers is twofold: first, to guide our students through the history of communication revolution, so that they can be empowered by the knowledge of how different media affect thought in different ways, and second, to help our students use one medium to challenge and engage another, to use the media--in Marshall McLuhan's words--"to clobber other media."

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Writing-Thinking:
The Historical Perspective for an Electronic World

In her seminal essay, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," Janet Emig argues for the importance of writing as a learning tool. I quote: "Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (122). Emig was not the first to so argue. Her essay acknowledges, for example, the earlier work of Lev Vygotsky, A. R. Luria, and Jerome Bruner in the study of cognition. Nevertheless, in a variety of ways, the writing-across-the-curriculum movement and the interest in writing as process as well as product are centered in Emig's synthesis, and the connection that Emig and others have demonstrated between writing and thinking informs the pages of College English, College Composition and Communication, and a variety of other journals interested in the connections between writing and learning. Whether Peter Elbow, arguing for the use of freewriting exercises to

free-up the creative act; or Sheridan Baker, pointing out that writing is a means to realize our maturity (225); or Elaine Maimon, stressing the use of writing to master the various academic disciplines; or Linda Flower, summarizing that "Writers don't find meanings, they make them" (21)--the agreement seems universal. Students must write to learn.

There is irony here. At almost the very moment that we as teachers recognized the special importance that writing plays in learning and in the creation of thought, we were also being told that we had moved beyond literacy into a postliterate world, a world Walter Ong calls one of "secondary orality," a world in which the word is no longer technologized chirographically and visually, but--through the telephone, radio, and television--orally as well, a world in which the word is no longer technologized in the fixed frame of the printing press, but also in the constantly changing frame of the computer screen. As teachers, the world of writing is central to our concerns, but more and more of us must wonder if our fears that television is destructive to our students' thinking, that our students are (to borrow a phrase from Neil Postman) amusing themselves to death--we must wonder if these fears are as irrelevant as Plato's objections to writing. Will future generations look back on us, as we look back on Plato, recognizing the very media many of us fear are nevertheless essential to the formation of our ideas? Ong and others have pointed out that "the philosphical thinking

Plato fought for depended entirely on [the] writing" (24) to which Plato objected: Will future generations find that the greatest achievements of the twentieth century, into an undetermined future, depended not on literacy but on the electronic media, not on literacy but on a postliterate mind?

Ong, Eric Havelock, and others who have written of the movement from an oral world to a literate one have been careful to document those changes in consciousness, brought by literacy, that are central to contemporary understandings of education. The analytic, distanced, and abstract qualities of literate thought are privileged in most classrooms; for Havelock, "the notion of a moral value system which was autonomous, while at the same time capable of internalization in the individual consciousness, was a literate invention" (4). Havelock even queries, "May not all logical thinking as commonly understood be a product of Greek alphabetic literacy?" (39) While recognizing the creative and joyous qualities of composition in an oral society, Ong also argues, "Without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials" (14-15).

Nevertheless, Ong's most important contribution to a pedagogy for a post-literate world is this: Recognizing that any shift in the medium of communication is always accompanied by fears of that shift, Ong argues that shaping to ourselves the tools of the new oral media of

communication should not be dehumanizing (83). Ong argues that living in a world of secondary orality should help us to use both orality and literacy. Secondary orality, as he defines it, has striking resemblances to the old orality: there is the same participatory mystique, the same fostering of a communal sense, the same concentration on the present moment, the same use of formulas (136). But secondary orality is "essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print." Ong gives few practical suggestions for the classroom, but his comment on the work of the deconstructionists is suggestive.

Ong writes: "The work of the deconstructionists and other textualists . . . derives its appeal in part from historically unreflexive, uncritical literacy. What is true in this work can often be represented more readily and forcefully by a more fully knowledgeable textualism--we cannot do away with texts, which shape our thought processes, but we can understand their weaknesses. . . . Without textualism, orality cannot even be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation--which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative" (169-70). Clearly our work as teachers is to draw on both textualism and orality, neither to titillate not to obfuscate, but to illuminate. But how is this to be done?

The question is obviously one of current interest. During the same time slot that we are meeting today, for example, two other sessions at CCCC deal with some of the same issues of orality and literacy we will consider. One is "The Functions of Talk in Writing Conferences"; the other, "Orality and Literacy in a Post-Modern World." I suspect if we were able to attend all three of these sessions, we would find at least one shared conclusion--that the question of how, in a world of secondary orality, to use orality and literacy to the illumination of each is a question easier to ask then to answer.

The difficulties are compounded by a number of factors. Surely one of the most important is that participants in a revolution lack the perspective for recording it. The consequences of the shift from orality to literacy became evident only after we had moved into an electronic world, as Ong, Havelock, and others have pointed out.

Moreover, the new electric/electronic technology of telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and computer continues to evolve--and the consequences are neither predictable nor similar. Consider the effects of knowledge technology and the creation of artificial intelligence. Pamela McCorduck writes, "We know from looking backward that mechanical amplifications of human memory, in the form of the written word, made profound unforeseeable changes. . . . We assume that equally or even more profound and

unforeseeable changes will come about as the consequence of our invention of a mechanical amplification of human reasoning power" (108). We cannot predict all the consequences of the computer--nor how its effect on reasoning will differ from the effect of television, although it seems fairly clear that the computer and televison strengthen different cognitive skills. There are many other similar examples.

How do we respond to this uncertainty in our classrooms? As teachers, particularly as teachers committed to the importance of the written word, we are conservative. Neil Postman has argued that while print is no longer the dominant medium of communication in our culture, the schools--the teachers--continue to act as if it were. Not that Postman advocates our embracing of the electronic media. Postman's primary concern, particularly as articulated in Amusing Ourselves to Death, has been that we would come--as in Brave New World--to love the technologies that he believes undo our capacities to think. Postman argues, "The printed word created the modern idea of prose, and invested exposition with unprecedented authority as a means of conducting public affairs. Television disdains exposition, which is serious, sequential, rational, and complex. It offers instead a mode of discourse in which everything is accessible, simplistic, concrete, and above all, entertaining" (EC 18). But the way in which to bring together orality and literacy is not to follow the model

that Postman deplores--that is, by turning all discourse into entertainment. Our approach must rather be to use one medium to help us understand both the strengths and--as Ong argues--the weaknesses of other media.

Marshall McLuhan said it more elegantly, "Each of the media is . . . a powerful weapon with which to clobber other media" (34-35).

This clobbering--like D. H. Lawrence's tension of opposites--provides the creative energy for growth. And for McLuhan, "Of all the great hybrid unions that breed furious release of energy and change, there is none to surpass the meeting of literate and oral cultures" (58). McLuhan reminds us of a variety of such hybrid unions: George Bernard Shaw's putting the press onto the stage, "as Dickens had done for the novel"; the movies taking over "the novel and the newspaper and the stage, all at once" (61), and so on. It is the hybrid union that will almost certainly come to inform the educational process, not by teachers' wheeling a movie projector or television monitor into the classroom for students to watch passively--as they so often do at home--, but by guiding students into the use of one medium to challenge, to clobber, another.

In so doing, we must begin where our students are. William Costanzo argues, "Many young people are more at home with oral forms of composition than with written ones. Their primary experience of language has developed through

activities of speaking and listening in which repetition, tag-on construction, imitation, stereotypes, and short-range, concrete thinking are not only accepted but indispensable characteristics of discourse. At times, it seems as if the legacy of Gutenberg has never reached them" (DE 232-33).

Costanzo has been actively engaged in the hard work of helping our students become media literate, suggesting ways to use--rather than be used by--television. For example, he argues that television is modifying the idea of authorship. We don't identify who wrote a television script--in the way we identify the author of a play or novel--in part because television scripts are often team-written. While as teachers we surely will not relinquish the idea of authorship and accountability of individual grades, we can recognize that students bring a mind-set already compatible with collaborative writing exercises, with dialogue, with learning logs that ask them to interrogate themselves as well as others.

As more and more students have access to their own computers, we can build on the important correspondences between programming and writing.

We can encourage students to think consciously about the differences in media by having them, for example, compare television coverage of an event with the coverage by a newspaper.

Perhaps most promising, however, is to let our teaching be informed by our realization of the differences that appear to be emerging in the thinking processes encouraged by our two most important electronic media--the television and the computer. These media apparently affect thought in different ways. All electronic media are not equal.

Again I quote from Costanzo: "Television is ritualistic, integrative, institutional. It teaches not through logic and analysis but through imitation and repetition." The computer, on the other hand, "privileges the text, logical analysis, and precise storage of information." For Costanzo, "Video games, computer adventures, and programming encourage a gradual shift away from holistic, nondeliberate thinking, toward active, structured, critical forms of thought" ("Language" 522-23). Students engaged in a learning environment that combines the holistic and integrative world of television and the analytical and structured world of the computer are students who should be uniquely capable of engaging one medium to clobber another.

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